MÁRIA SZEPES

Foreword to the Reissue (1999)

The Story of the Foreword

It was in the year 1997 that I first met Mária Szepes, the world-renowned representative of esoteric literature — a fact I mentioned in the December 1997 issue of the Budapest-based *Filmvilág* (see archive.org: Dr. Jenő Farkas – *Drakula halála* 1997). Mária had known Károly Lajthay, the director of *Drakula halála* (The Death of Dracula) — the very first Dracula silent film in the world — since her childhood, as well as Mihály Kertész (Michael Curtiz), who was already a prominent figure in Hungarian cinema at the time.After the first publication of Károly Lajthay's film novel *Drakula halála* in 1924, I asked writer Mária Szepes — nearly seven decades later — to write a foreword for its reissue, which she gladly agreed to do. A few years earlier, Lokke Heiss, an American researcher, had also visited the author at her Budapest home and conducted an interview with her. At my request, Mária Szepes wrote an introduction for the reissue of the *Drakula halála* film novel, which I had discovered. This reissue was realized in 2010, when I published the text of the *Drakula halála* film book in Hungarian for the first time, based on the script written and released by Lajos Pánczél 101 years earlier — naturally including the sensational foreword by Mária Szepes. The new edition included this foreword as well as a longer study (pp. 245–292) in the chapter *Dracula on the Silver Screen* in the book *Drakula és a vámpírok* (Dracula and the Vampires.) In her foreword, the author, with the credibility of an eyewitness, introduces and brilliantly characterizes the rebirth of Hungarian filmmaking, its key figures, world-famous Hungarian actresses and directors — all with excellent literary flair and superb irony. And yet, no so-called "expert" ever mentions this invaluable piece of writing. Both the *Filmvilág* article and Mária Szepes's text clearly illuminate the fact that it was I who, after years of research up to 1997, discovered — with the help of my historian-librarian friend György Béla — the screenplay, photographs, articles, posters, and advertisements related to the first Dracula film in the collection of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest. Even though in 1998, Lokke Heiss[1]— an excellent American expert on the topic — wrote that I had found the novelized film script written by Lajthay and Curtiz, this fact has been consistently ignored.

See: Lokke Heiss: *Dracula Unearthed. Digging up details on the lost 1921 silent film, the first inspired by Stoker's Count*, *Cinefantastique*, New York, October 1998, pp. 90–92. In French: *Vampirisme.com Interviews* (*Interview avec un universitaire: Jenő Farkas*), 2023. In Italian: *Carmilla, Visum et Repertum 4 – Jenő Farkas*, Franco Pezzini, 2025. And most recently on archive.org: *Jenő Farkas – Drakula halála 1997*. **Jenő Farkas**

[1] Graven Images: The Search for Drakula (part 2) | Lokke Heiss

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Foreword to the Reissue (1999)

(Bevezető az újrakiadáshoz)

First published in english

I consider interesting and symbolic Jenő Farkas's[2] request to write a foreword for his study on Károly Lajthay's film The Death of Dracula, analyzing the script and the Dracula effect. In someone like my humble self, who was born in the Monarchy and now lingers here in full possession of their mental faculties during this critical and peculiar era, countless layers of memories arrange themselves into patterns of coherence when reflecting on this incomparable lifetime.

The study[3] of Jenő Farkas stirs up names, figures, and painful memories. I am aware to what degree lived up to the expectations of ordinary people and great minds the much anticipated 20th century. Not at all. Instead it caused disappointment, sorrow, grief, and failure, experiences without solutions and disastrous consequences of poor decisions. […] Without doubt the victorious powers fatally lost the peace… No sociologist, reasonable thinker, scientist, or artist would deny that the peace treaties dictated by maniac vengeance, the lost territories, and the breakup of the natural unity of the world resulted in Hitler's reign of terror, the monstrous acts of World War II, the Holocaust, followed by the equally inhumane dictatorships of red fascism built on lies and cruelty.

But now on the subject of post-World War I Hungary's strange reactions in all areas of public life. The brief leftist proletarian dictatorship was followed by merciless, unscrupulous retaliations of the right-wing "detachments." Our truncated little country, at the command of the victors, chose a governor for itself, who danced to the tune played by his masters.

Our country endured horrific material burdens, currency depreciation, massive inflation, hunger, poverty, and yet still managed to act European to a certain degree. Writers wrote. Theaters performed. Coffeehouses operated. Even in this diminished, miserable condition especially Buda and Pest, reflected their kinship with Vienna, the former imperial city. The "mozi" (cinema) – as Jenő Heltai abbreviated "mozgókép" (moving pictures) to "mozi" – originating in the fairground, entered the music cafés, then moved on to smaller and larger cinemas, initially silent with subtitles, but having increasing success. Its creators, among them my mother[4] and father, Béla Balogh[5], still believed the film to be a genre of art, not just a profit-driven industry. The ASTRA film studio, founded by my mother, and later the Pasarét STAR (Budapest) glass studio from 1920-1924, produced 10-15 feature films annually, reaching numerous reprises and even foreign audiences.

Hungarian actresses often performed abroad under stage names. Sári Megyeri[6] who later became a

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[2] Jenő Farkas (1944–) professor at the Department of Romanian Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and the author of several books on Romanian literature, as well as a Dracula researcher based in Budapest. He is the author of *Drakula vajda históriája* (*The History of Dracula Voivode*, Academic Publishing House, Budapest, 1989) and *Drakula és a vámpírok* (*Dracula and the Vampires*, Palamart Publishing House, Budapest, 2010). He found the script for the film *Drakula halála* (*The Death of Dracula*) by Károly Lajthay in 1995, and was the first in the world to report this discovery — publishing three excerpts from the screenplay.

[3] This is a study written about the script of the film *The Death of Dracula* (see Farkas Jenő: *Drakula és a vámpírok* (Dracula and the Vampires, 2010)

[4] Mária Szepes's mother was Mária Kronémer (1883–1953), known by her stage name Margit Kornai, a singer and actress.

[5] His foster father was Béla Balogh. After the death of his father, the actor Oziás Scherbak (1877–1911), his mother married Béla Balogh in 1915. He was a famous film director.

[6] Sári Megyeri (1897-1983) actress, writer, poet, journalist, known as Sacy von Blondel, a star of the silent film era.

famous writer, performed in German films as Sacy von Blondel. Luci Kovács had a lead role as Lucy Doraine[7]. Antónia Farkas[8], married to Alexander Korda, briefly became a world-famous star as Beautiful Helen under the stage name Maria Corda. Our very handsome excellent film and stage actor Mihály Várkonyi[9] was already signed on in America with the world famous Cecil B. deMille film productions. With his beautiful Roman profile he played Pilate under the stage name Victor Varconi in the famous director's production.[10]

Béla Lugosi, a communist left the country in 1919 after the red dictatorship, left for America on an adventurous journey. He was considered a mediocre actor at home, but his silent film performance, especially as Dracula, propelled him to the pinnacle of success.

In Hungary, the First World War was followed by a strange wave of substitute activities, manifesting in the mushroom-like proliferation of spiritualist circles. These so-called "spiritless magnets" attracted hopeless, broken people, mental and economic shipwrecks. My family also had a brief period of involvement, but we were too professional to settle for the productions of amateur mediums and diluted sermons.

In hindsight I can see that this stage, sparking almost synod-like debates, had some impact on our development. We had to deal with problems that led us to philosophy, science, and all branches of the arts. The spiritualists of that era seem mild compared to today's swarming sects pursuing mostly dangerous, interest-driven fanatical deceptions, even if some are well intentioned.

At age 14 I met Károly Lajthay at the New Year's Eve party of the film industry held in the New York Café in Budapest. He asked my parents for permission to cast me in a role for his upcoming film *Leánybecsület* (Girl's Honor, 1923). We didn't take his offer seriously, even forgot about it, but he repeated his request. We shot my scenes in the Studio of Pasarét in the still wintery, freezing glasshouse.

Lajthay cast his persuasive charms on a champagne magnate's fortune and erogenous zones. He funded the film. Hannie Reinwald[11], sister of the famous silent film star Ossie Oswalda played the female lead. It was not uncommon then, as it is not now for actor siblings to perform under different stage names. To my surprise, the pretty young Austrian woman had a hip deformity. Regardless, the financier still liked her, because a large, rectangular diamond brooch adorned our star's chest on the first day of shooting. The brooch read: LAPA[12]. Of course, the industry's gossip immediately ironized its meaning as "Lajthay caught a sucker". Lajthay was a loud, handsome, nervous, lively "Pest character." A slick, unique individual who shouted directions with one hand in his pocket, and biting his nails on the other hand. His young wife looked up at her "man" adoringly, considered a slippery, evasive catch by women. The current young wife would sit enchanted like a "bunny" all night in one of the clubs "Fészek" (Nest) or "Otthon" (Home) while her husband lost heavily at cards. I don't remember if this film was successful and I didn't see Dracula either. But even an alchemist-themed film was produced with Oszkár Beregi and Lili Berky in the lead roles.

Years later in 1989 I was contacted in Los Angeles about my strange book that I started when I was 29 and wrote it over five years: *The Red Lion: The Elixir of Eternal Life.*[13] It was published in 1946 and it

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She played the female lead in forty-nine Hungarian and German films.

[7] Lucy Doraine (born Ilona Kovács 1898–1989) was a Hungarian film actress of the silent era. She appeared in more than 20 films between 1918 and 1931. She was married to film director Michael Curtiz from 1918 to 1923.

[8] María Korda (born Mária Antónia Farkas; Korda Mária; 1898–1976) was a Hungarian actress and a star of the silent era in Germany and Austria. She was married to Alexander Korda.

[9] Victor Varconi (born Mihály Várkonyi, 1891–1976) was a highly successful silent film actor in Hungary. He was the first Hungarian actor to make a film in the United States. He also appeared in British and Italian films.

[10] It's about the movie *The King of Kings,* (1927), produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille, Victor Varconi as Pontius Pilate

[11] Hannie Reinwald, sister of the famous silent film star, Ossie Oswalda played the female lead.

[12] The film *The Death of Dracula* was also made at the LAPA film factory in Budapest.

[13] Mária Szepes: *The Red Lion: The Elixir of Eternal Life* was first published in hungarian, in 1946, under the authorship of Mária Orsi, by Hungária Publishing House, after it was published in USA by Püski Publishing in 1984, and then in Munich by the Heyne Verlag (1984).

became a bestseller. During the Rákosi era, it was confiscated and burned with many other books. The fire was beneficial to my book, like a phoenixrising from the ashes. In 1984 it was republished in Munich by the Heyne Verlag,and its eight editions sold 160,000 copies. A Hungarian psychologist couple and their friends fell in love with its topic. They looked for me for years, believing me dead.

They assumed I must be a man or a secret society to write such a great Work. Then they happily found me. I received a cordial and ceremonial invitation from them and their circle to Upland, from where they commuted daily to their workplace psychiatric clinic in Los Angeles. They introduced me to Mr. Forrest J Ackerman's [14]Hollywood home. Nicknamed Mr. Forry by his friends he published a horror magazine, was the first science fiction publisher and was very wealthy. He corresponded with science fiction circles worldwide. As a horror fanatic he adored Béla Lugosi all, above preserved
everything belonging to him as a museum piece and wrote about him in every magazine issue.

Unfortunately, my poor psychologist friend Mrs. Bondor had to suffer translating Lugosi's only and extremely long Hungarian poem given to her by the elated Mrs. Forry. Grace Bondor sweated blood, as the poem was very bad.

Mr. Forry proved to be the most charming host. In his enormous house, with a kitchen that cooked for 400 people sometimes, he seated me in Abraham Lincoln's armchair. I even tried out the lift that carried his 90-year-old mother between floors and was a replica of the famous
vehicle used in *Witness for the Prosecution*.[15]

As for Dracula, Stoker's novel wasn't the only thing that achieved unexpected success. Numerous films were based on it, some of great artistic value. To avoid using the copyrighted Dracula name, the German F.W. Murnau made the best vampire film under the title *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror,* with the actor Max Schreck, whose terrifyingly authentic portrayal made it unique. In 1932 the Danish director Carl-Theodor Dreyer filmed the masterpiece *Vampyr*, or *The Strange Adventure of David Gray*, filled with stunning beauty, unforgettable ambiance, and wonderful symbols.

It is no surprise that the Dracula myth blossomed again at the end of our tumultuous era. Why should he be excluded from the terrifying horror dramas on the world stage?

Budapest, 1999

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[14] Forrest J. Ackerman (1916-2008) was an American editor, writer, and science fiction enthusiast, best known for founding *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. He was a pioneering figure in science fiction fandom and is often credited with coining the term "sci-fi." In 1972, Forrest J. Ackerman visited Budapest. Without meeting Mária Szepes, his sole purpose was to collect everything related to Béla Lugosi, the unforgettable Dracula — his films, photographs, film scripts, costume designs, the recollections of those who knew him, and any available information about his life.

[15] *Witness for the Prosecution* is a 1957 directed by Billy Wilder and starring Tyrone Power, Marlene Dietrich, Charles Laugthon.